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ABSTRACT

Despite the avowed intentions of teachers who become administrators, educational planning processes frequently fail to produce adequate responses to educational needs. The fault for this failure can be ascribed in part to a lack of understanding of the planning process, particularly of the need to assess problems before proposing solutions. Even more critical, however, is the need to recognize that the bureaucratic structure of educational administration, while apparently efficient, is also often dysfunctional. Deriving from the monarchical form of government, the hierarchical structure of educational administration passes power from top to bottom. Those in the hierarchy are always more responsive to the desires of their superiors than to the actual needs of those below them. Until decision-making power is redistributed, administrators and teachers are always going to be at odds and educational change is going to be a slow and painful process. (Author/PGD)

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Divine Right Administration --- and Other Foolishness

Michael Koehler, Ph.D.

Educational administration, when it realized viability in the forties and fifties, became the primary avenue for promotion and more money for the school teacher. Some few teachers, experiencing a general dissatisfaction with their classroom responsibilities, looked to administration as the means to gain increased status and prestige within the community as well as within the school system. Some of these teachers viewed administration as a challenge, an opportunity to influence the total system by applying their personal and professional values in such a way as to positively affect the system. As teachers, either they perceived shortcomings within the system and saw involvement in administration as a means to personally resolve some of them, or they desired a stronger voice in the operation of school affairs.

What factors, then, operating within the school system account for the inability of administrators to effect positively the re-design of the system and its several opera tions? If most administrators are fundamentally competent people and if they enter the profession with a real interest in working with people, students in particular, why do many school systems, maybe most, find it so difficult to maintain really quality programs or to effect needed change? If we can accept

the initial premise that most administrators are competent as well as concerned, then something within the dynamics of the organization must be compromising its attempts to change or to maintain essential components within the program. Many teachers decry the fact that "teachers turned administrator" appear to alter their philosophies and seem no longer willing or able to identify with the continuing problems of the classroom teacher. Such administrators often are accused of playing "the organizational game" and of disregarding or subverting needed improvement of the school's educational program. They are branded "administratively expedient."

The growing weight of clearly articulated, albiet undocumented, opinion substantiates the existence of a real problem in education, namely the inability of school systems to effect well-planned change. Several years ago, Max Abbott identified bureaucracy as the culprit. He indicated that the five most significant characteristics of bureaucracy persistently have interferred with the attempts of persons within many school systems to seek improvements within the program. Following is a brief description of those five characteristics:

1. All personnel are assigned fixed responsibilities which are identified as official duties.
2. All personnel are arranged in levels of graded authority.
3. All activities within the organization are controlled

by general rules of policies.

4. The organization is most efficient when emotional elements are eliminated from interpersonal relationships.

5. Employment within the system is based on technical competence and becomes a career for the employee.

Most proponents of bureaucracy avow these characteristics because they faciltate coordination, emphasize rationality, underscore the need for technical competence, and increase the predictability of employee behavior within the system. Abbott himself acknowledges the organizational advantages of bureaucracy and the coordination it provides for "... individuals and groups of individuals with diverse interests and responsibilities ...."[1] He goes on, however, to posit several dysfunctional consequences of bureaucracy and of the hierarchical organization that accompanies it. Primary among his negative consequences is the inability of potential changes to "work their way through" varying levels of hierarchical authority. A "no" at any level of the hierarchy blocks the change and reaffirms the status quo of the organization. Abbott's observations, therefore, identify hierarchical organization as a major interference to educational re-design.

But interferences other than those identified by Abbott should be discussed. One such interference involves the kinds of planning activities in which most schools engage. Even a cursory investigation of planning processes in most

school systems reveals a disturbing inability of educators to maintain activities which lead to purposeful change within the institution. Consider the vast array of ephemeral programs which have found their way into schools but have done little to affect positively the learning experiences of students. Variable modular scheduling, student unassigned time, continuous progress curricula, team teaching, and open classrooms are only a few of the programs which have found enthusiastic but brief acceptance in many schools across the country. Initially identified by many school authorities as new and exciting ways to revitalize the school program, such concepts fell into disfavor when students, parents, teachers, and administrators realized that they did not seem to be working. As is sometimes the case, people discovered that realization fell far short of expectation. What many of them failed to realize was that such programs constituted solutions to poorly defined problems.

Because most of education's recent innovations have realized variable success in some school systems, their efficacy in the right situation hardly can be questioned. The planning activities of educators, however, their good intentions and concern notwithstanding, frequently result in the implementation of pre-packaged solutions without the preliminary dimensionalization of a problem. The right

solution, therefore, is often applied to the wrong problem. Its failure thus assured, the solution/program is censured and scrapped, and the school system then investigates other solutions or, more often, seeks a return to "the way things were," thereby obscuring the inadequacy of the school's planning processes but securing the sanction of previously established practice.

That administrators involved in such school programs seem to be playing the "organizational game" is no surprise. Without at least a basic understanding of efficient planning processes, school administrators fail to identify and resolve the real needs of the organization. In addition, they maintain homeostasis within the system by concentrating their decisions on maintenance considerations such as staff recruitment, staff deployment, registration procedures, student attendance and discipline, and the like. Certainly, such considerations are fundamental within the organization and deserve the ongoing attention of the school's administration. They remain, however, only a part of the planning and decisional processes within the school.

Occasionally, maintenance considerations in some schools become the only focus of planning and decisional activity. In such instances, systematic evaluation of the total school program suffers; and the administrative staff, with or without student and faculty input, makes most of the terminal

decisions regarding the management of the system. Such a process not only disregards the more global needs of the system, it also identifies the chief administrator as a functionary and obscures his or her role as a leader within the school. Leadership, then, becomes a function of hierarchical position, and the administrator finds himself or herself further and further removed from the people and the real "action" of the system. Such an administrator operates much like the divine right monarch, who maintained ascendancy more through hierarchical position than through personal influence on the system's success.

Interestingly, the current structure of educational administration comes as close to the divine right monarchy as anything in contemporary society and, as such, has served to interfere with needed change in schools. Educational administration, like the divine right monarchy, involves a flow of power from the top to the bottom, i.e. from the superintendent/principal to the students/faculty. Democratic processes, in pure concept, involve an opposite flow of power, from the bottom to the top. The similarities do not end there.

Simply defined, the divine right concept holds the ruler responsible only to God or to some ultimate authority, not to his subjects. Superintendents, by way of comparison,

are held responsible only to the board of education. Principals are responsible only to the superintendent. And so it goes. Although superintendents and principals may organize student and faculty advisory groups which may assist with the development or the evaluation of district/school policy, ultimate decisions made by the administration may at times more nearly reflect the expectations of the board of education than the assessed needs of the system.

Interestingly, bureaucracy and the hierarchical arrangement it introduced to education are a direct result of the absolute monarchy. "Indeed, modern government owes one of its most distinguishing features, bureaucracy, primarily to these absolute monarchs."[2] The predominant form of government from the sixteenth to the end of the eighteenth centuries, the absolute monarchy not only induced principals of bureaucracy but at times exploited them as strangleholds on other agencies of the government. Examples of such exploitation are Prussia and Austria after the Napoleonic Wars when bureaucracy prevailed, the emporer being the only means of coordination among the various departments of government. Although both countries maintained a legislature and a judiciary (two elements, incidently, which were to reduce the concentration of power in the monarchy), each was subject to the censure of the monarch

and was dependent upon him for the ultimate approval of all government decisions.

Again, parallels exist in educational administration. Superintendents and principals in many school districts maintain grievance committees and advisory committees on policy and salary considerations. In addition, many have developed due process procedures and principles of participative management. Although partially induced by judicial decree, such processes normally have reflected the genuine concern of administrators. Because superintendents and principals, however, are responsible primarily to the board of education, they retain terminal decision-making authority. Like the divine right monarch, they coordinate decisional activities within the system but either make or approve all decisions of any consequence. Considering the fact that most boards of education hold superintendents exclusively accountable for what happens in the system, that administrators retain terminal decision-making authorities is not surprising. Nor is it surprising that education as a system is so averse to change. Decisional authorities in the hands of only one or two people inhibits the diversity required within a system to engender and to vitalize new ideas.

History reveals that movements toward legislative,

hence representational influence on decision-making will be ineffective without concomitant constitutional limitations on executive/monarchical authority. Again, Prussia and Austria after the Napoleonic Wars are primary examples. So is American education. Decisional authorities are so firmly rooted in the positions of superintendent and principal that significant change within most school systems results only secondarily from internal planning processes and primarily from replacing the superintendent or the principal. And constitutional limitations on that authority do not seem to be forthcoming. But it is nonetheless interesting to observe that a country which has maintained a constitutional balance of power within its political institutions also has perpetuated the divine right principle within its educational insitutions.

Combined with the dysfunctional consequences of hierarchical organization and the limitations of inadequate planning processes, "divine right administration" continues to inhibit needed change in most school systems. Clearly, changes in the educational programs or the administrative organization of school systems will not materialize overnight. The challenges confronting education within most of the literature or from community or government authorities have not portended consequences grave enough to provoke the

soul-searching required to effect change. Years of tradition are self-sustaining; routines have become rituals; and the tenuous relationship between teacher and administrator seems indissolubly a part of the changeless face of education.

Positive change will occur in education only after problems have been clearly defined. Administrative re-design and efficient planning processes will emerge only after educators recognize and accept the reality of a problem. This paper has represented an attempt to give added scope to that problem.

Notes

1 Abbott, Max. "Hierarchical Impediments to Innovation in Educational Organizations." Organizations and Human Behavior: Focus on Schools. Carver and Sergiovanni, editors. McGraw-Hill. 1969. p. 45.

2 Encyclopedia Britannica. Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc. Chicago, London, and Toronto. 1952. p. 563.